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VIII. LITERARY CHINESE

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Besides the many different dialects, many of which have their own written counterparts of varying degrees of completeness, there is yet another language in China known as the literary language, as it is usually called by Western writers. It is the language of China's undying classics and owes its preservation to the inflexible and conservative system of writing of the country. As such, it has no standard pronunciation of its own. In other words, it has as many standards of pronunciation as there are dialects in China. That is to say that if a passage written in wenli is read by a speaker of Northern or Southwestern Mandarin, Kan-Hakka, Cantonese or Southern Min, it will sound like the dialect he speaks. Moreover, in grammar and syntax, literary Chinese is so different from any of the dialects that it is almost a different language, entirely free from the influences of the changes that have taken place in the dialects. Hence, it is possible for a lettered Chinese at the same time to speak his own dialect and write literary Chinese without any strange feeling on his part at all. As a language, literary Chinese is noted for its conciseness, frequently leaving out many things which are ordinarily expressed, thus creating a kind of ambiguous terseness all its own, requiring its readers to fill in the missing elements as they go along. This characteristic accounts for the reason why a passage written in literary Chinese, when read aloud, can seldom be fully understood by a listener even though he may speak the dialect of the person reading.

Despite such a shortcoming, literary Chinese has been exerting a tenacious influence on the Chinese, especially the lettered segment of the population. It

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is literary Chinese that has kept China's classics alive and perpetuated the many pithy dicta of wisdom unsurpassed in the living language of the Chinese people despite dialectal barriers of any kind. Although the written national language has been gaining wider and wider acceptance, the great majority of government and commercial organizations are still using literary Chinese in the transactions of their routine business. 212 195

IX. LANGUAGE REFORMS

Attempts to introduce language reforms in China began on a nationwide basis with the movement to unify the national language shortly after the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1911. The movement was followed closely by efforts to reform the written language. Those who advocated such reforms were of the opinion that since the characters were so complicated and time-consuming for the average person to learn, and since literary Chinese was so unrealistic and impractical, something had to be done to make the written language of China more effective, so that it could be within the grasp of the average Chinese citizen in a relatively short period of time. 212 185

A. Phonetic Symbols

One type of reform advocated the use of phonetic symbols as an aid to the illiterate to learn to read. However, since the sole function of these symbols is phonetic, they are effective when they are used as a guide to correct pronunciation in accordance with the standard of the national language for the purpose of leveling down dialectal differences in pronunciation. They are helpful only to those who have not yet acquired such a knowledge. They cannot possibly add 198 185